

VZCZCXR00136

RR RUEHBC RUEHCHI RUEHDA RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHDT RUEHGI RUEHHM RUEHJS
RUEHKUK RUEHLH RUEHNH RUEHPW RUEHROV
DE RUEHGP #2133 3340828
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 300828Z NOV 07
FM AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4520
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 2062

UNCLAS SINGAPORE 002133

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV KISL SOCI SCUL SN

SUBJECT: MAJOR OVERHAUL OF SINGAPORE'S MADRASAH SYSTEM

REF: A. A. SINGAPORE 785

- ¶B. B. 06 SINGAPORE 1467
¶C. C. 05 SINGAPORE 1835

¶11. (U) Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Dr. Yaacob Ibrahim announced last month a major restructuring of Singapore's full-time madrasah system -- which serves roughly five percent of Singapore's Malay/Muslim students (Ref A). The reorganization is prompted by a requirement that full-time madrasah students pass primary-level standardized tests by 2008 and funding shortfalls that all six madrasahs face. According to the announcement, starting in 2009, three of the six schools will pool their resources to enhance specialization and cut costs, while maintaining separate campuses. One madrasah will provide primary instruction. Another will provide secondary education to students interested in pursuing religious studies at the tertiary level. The third madrasah will provide secondary education with a secular focus, to prepare students to become part of the Singaporean workforce. The three madrasahs not involved have adopted a "wait-and-see" approach.

¶12. (SBU) Previously, GOS and madrasah officials were optimistic that madrasah students would pass the standardized tests (Ref A). However, one madrasah official told us that the madrasahs now worry that too many students might fail the exams, a factor that helped motivate the reorganization plan. She also predicted that the changes would encourage implementation of a new integrated curriculum developed by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), the government statutory board for Muslim affairs, which most other madrasahs apart from her own have resisted.

¶13. (U) Press reaction to the changes has been mixed. One editorial in the Malay language daily newspaper lauded the changes, but letters to the editor have questioned MUIS' educational expertise and questioned the decision to have one madrasah focus on secular studies. Subsequently, MUIS announced additional funding for the madrasahs.

¶14. (SBU) Comment: The changes come too late to help madrasah students pass their exams in 2008. However, the announcement indicates that madrasah officials are finally ready to make the tough decisions necessary to maintain the viability of Islamic religious education in Singapore. End comment.

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